09/22/23 • BIG PHARMA › NEWS

As Child Suicide Rates Climb in U.S., Experts Call for Early Intervention

Pediatric suicide rates are on the rise due to a number of psychological, neurological and social factors. Experts are calling for better tracking and prevention strategies, including Improving communication between parents and their children and increasing support to students and staff at school.

By KFF Health News

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By Cheryl Platzman Weinstock

Jason Lance thought Jan. 21, 2010, was a day like any other until the call came.

He had dropped off his 9-year-old son, Montana, at Stewart's Creek Elementary School in The Colony, Texas, that morning.

"There were no problems at home. He was smart. He wore his heart on his sleeve and he talked and talked and talked," said Lance. It was "the same old, same old normal day. There were kisses and goodbyes and he said, 'I love you, Daddy.'"

A few hours later, school officials called to say Montana had died by suicide while locked in the nurse's bathroom.

"I knew he had some issues going on in school, but I never seen it coming," said Lance. His shock and grief were complicated by the realization that there may have been more signs his son was struggling.

As children across the country step back into school routines this fall, it is important to pay attention to their mental health as well as their academics.

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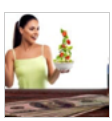
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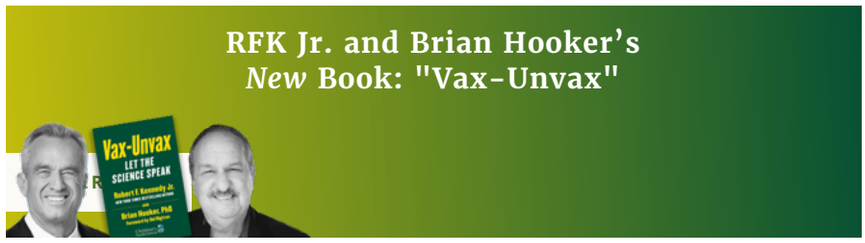
Suicide ranks as either the seventh- or eighth-leading cause of death among children ages 5 to 11, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and recent studies.

And numbers show the rates among younger kids appear to have increased in the past decade, especially among Black males.



A growing body of research shows that "historically we thought that suicide is a problem of teens and adults, but younger children are expressing similar thoughts that may have been ignored before," said Paul Lipkin, a pediatrician at the Kennedy Krieger Institute in Baltimore and a specialist in developmental disabilities such as autism.

This has many experts calling for lowering the screening age for suicide ideation in children and moving to develop more effective early suicide risk detection and targeted prevention strategies.

The broad approach includes pediatricians, teachers and parents working with children at a young age to build their resilience and identify and manage their stress.

Studies have found that young children gain an understanding of death and killing oneself from TV or other media, discussions with other children, or exposure to death from a family or community loss.

"Pediatric suicide wasn't on our radar decades ago and maybe was underreported," said Holly Wilcox, president of the International Academy of Suicide Research and a professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore. "The truth is that now we can do stuff about it."

It is quite likely the 136 reported suicides from 2001 to 2021 among 5- to 9-year-olds were an undercount.

"Counts are often incomplete, and causes of death may be pending investigation resulting in an underestimate relative to final counts," said Margaret Warner, a senior epidemiologist at the CDC.

The problems with those numbers are important because, Warner said, "If we are missing deaths, or don't have all the information leading to them, we can't properly develop programs to prevent future deaths."

That's why there's also an ongoing national effort by coroners and medical examiners to improve the quality and consistency of pediatric death investigations.

Leaders in suicide prevention hope this wide spotlight on pediatric suicide will also help curtail the rising suicide rate among people ages 10 to 24 in the U.S. since suicide is the second-leading cause of death in that age group, according to the CDC.

Some of the increase in mental health issues among children has been attributed to the isolation and lack of school structure during the pandemic.

Beginning in April 2020, pediatric emergency room visits for children 5 to 11 increased by approximately 24%, according to a CDC report from November 2020.

Other factors, such as being neurodivergent or having a psychiatric disorder, can make a child more vulnerable to suicide.

A study published in February in Frontiers in Public Health also found that being the victim or perpetrator of bullying is a risk factor for suicide, even when

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researchers controlled for other risk factors.

Montana Lance was diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, as well as dyslexia and often was the target of bullying at school.

Officials at the Lewisville Independent School District declined to comment on Montana's death. His parents filed a lawsuit against the school district, but it was dismissed, and the district was found not liable for his death.

Suicide is complex, but recent studies have found that there are things parents, teachers, pediatricians and caregivers can do to help protect children from it.

Lisa Horowitz, a pediatric psychologist and staff scientist at the National Institute of Mental Health, said, "It's never too early to start a conversation with kids about recognizing mental health distress and doing what we can do to help them have better coping strategies and foster resilience."

Building resilience in children can help buffer them in times of stress, according to a study published in 2022 in Frontiers of Psychiatry.

"I don't want people to panic but just want them to be vigilant about their children," said Horowitz.

Sometimes that vigilance can be "tricky" because depression may look different in younger kids. They may act out, be more irritable and not manifest their symptoms in the same way as teens and adults, Wilcox said.

"We don't have enough studies on how best to identify preteens and children at risk for suicide. Oftentimes you just have to trust your gut about these things," she said.

If a child is upset, parents should ask them questions about what they're experiencing, said Tami D. Benton, psychiatrist-in-chief, executive director, and chair of the Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia.

"Parents shouldn't talk kids out of their feelings or give them examples of when it happened to them, or minimize their feelings. It puts them down," she said.

Parents and children should come up with a plan together, but also teach their children that they can master these situations, said Benton.

When parents get stuck about what to do in difficult situations, they should consult with their child's pediatrician.

In March, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended universal screening for suicide risk in all children 12 and older and when clinically indicated for kids 8 to 11.

There aren't any screening tools validated for use in children under 8. But Horowitz said younger children can still be assessed and evaluated for suicide risk.

Schools can also play an important role in suicide prevention.

Meghan Feby, a school counselor in the Colonial School District in New Castle, Delaware, said:

> "I am the sole school counselor in my building. It is a daunting task. That's why there are supports in place that have eyes where I can't have eyes … on school computers.
>
> "Employing software strategies like GoGuardian Beacon can really help fill in gaps and supports."

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The software captures keywords and phrases that might indicate a child is thinking about suicide and has already been used to intervene when children using district computers displayed concerning behavior.

It monitors activities on school computers used by more than 6.7 million public school students in kindergarten through 12th grade.

Some schools said they are having problems implementing software like this because some parents find it intrusive.

Many schools use the Good Behavior Game, a decades-old behavior management intervention for kids in first and second grades, and it has been used in higher grades.

The team-oriented classroom curriculum uses peer pressure to stimulate students to be attentive and engaged and work together.

Researchers such as Wilcox have studied the extensive participation of thousands of students and found it reduced suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

Children who have played the game were half as likely as young adults to report suicidal thoughts and about a third less likely to report a suicide attempt.

Lance said that the day Montana died by suicide changed his life forever.

"You're not supposed to bury your children. They're supposed to bury you," he said. "All this attention on the mental health status of children these days is not going to bring my child back, but it can stop another family from suffering."

Originally published by KFF Health News.

Cheryl Platzman Weinstock is an award-winning journalist who reports about health and science research and its impact on society, with a focus on mental health, medical ethics issues and the medical research gender gap.

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Lundy Bancroft
6 days ago edited

Yes, there is reason for concern, but watch out!! Big Pharma is seizing these concerns to heavily push the medicating of children with psych meds, almost always against the child's will and often even against what the parents want. Most supposed services don't turn out to offer much actual emotional and psychological health; they declare that there's a "chemical imbalance" -- despite this having been long-since shown to be a myth -- and their solution is long-term medicating of the child, with endless side-effects and minimal psychological benefit. These are the same economic interests that are forcing the vaccines upon us. Anyone who wants to see the detailed research and analysis, see Robert Wipond's outstanding book, *Your Consent is Not Required: The Rise in Psychiatric Detentions, Forced Treatment, and Abusive Guardianships*.

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Beatrice → Lundy Bancroft
5 days ago

Is this the real Lundy Bancroft? If so, just wanted to say thank you for all the work you've done to help those like myself who were severely mistreated.

I agree with your points but I would like to add that technology has created a state of de-personalization in so many people today and that, combined with the extremely poor economy and loss of opportunity in this country, leaves children and adults feeling invisible, worthless and living without purpose and meaning. Without a life with purpose and meaning, there is no life at all in my opinion.

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Ektor
5 days ago

You mean the experts want to use drugs early on and more of them.

3 0 Reply • Share ›

BChristine
5 days ago

Mental illness and suicide rates in this country for both children and adults are only going to get worse as time goes on, UNLESS there are some significant changes made within our government and how this country is run (RFK Jr I am thinking of you :) Too many broken systems and too much corruption that's gone on for far too long. "Fixing" some of these things is a start, but only when and if we get the right person in the WH.

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Jim MacKellar
6 days ago

This is one of the things that happen when a society turns it back on God. When you know that Jesus loves you then there is always hope.

3 2 Reply • Share ›

gwirllais → Jim MacKellar
6 days ago

No jim, this is what happens when such sectes are allowed to condition people'S optic on life, that is based on abuse as "love" and love as abuse. As xtianity is clearly about, and its two brothers are not far behind. This is what happens when one teaches a child that they must do something to be acceptable, instead of knowing that they are an extension of Source, and that their decisions count and create their freedom. Ceratinly not teaching them all the extremely abusive and obvious unkind images and messages in the bible.

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Jim MacKellar → gwirllais
5 days ago

You miss my point. What has modern christianity got to do with God. Not a lot I'm afraid. Like the rest of western society they have turned their back on the true message of salvation. Jesus gave us only two commands. Love thy God with all your heart, mind, body and soul and love oneanother as I have loved you. No other requirements to be 'acceptable'.
If we do our best to live our lives by these principles then we come to understand what is true unconditional love. But because we have turned our backs on God most people will never experience this most powerful of forces in human existance. With unconditional love there is always hope. Without it comes despair and death.

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Beatrice ↗ gwirllais
5 days ago

I agree with Jim. I'm not referring to religion. As I mentioned below, religion has nothing to do with living a spiritual life. There are plenty of religious people who are about as spiritual as a screw. But, when a person believes in a higher power and feels connected to the life around them, they live with a higher purpose and can find meaning in all experiences. We grow from adversity instead of becoming victims. We love unconditionally with the confidence that no matter how others treat us, the only thing that matters is how we treat others. We also have a strong sense of divinely created value and will not allow others to exploit or demoralize us.

I have known so many people who were abused by religions, but religions are not the only 'cult' that abuses us. Educators, spouses, parents, our elected leaders, commerce/marketing, etc.. all contribute to a person's sense of identity and value in a society. In my opinion, America is one of the most immoral and indecent countries in the world. The way we treat our children, the way men and women objectify each other and themselves is quite disturbing and sad. We've lost our way because we

see more

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nsloveco ↗ gwirllais
6 days ago

Agreed. I grew up in an evangelical Christian community and struggled with mental illness until I left (and had my “friends” turn their backs on me) 22 years later. It’s been 8 years now since I freed myself from it. I no longer depend on the myriad of mental health meds I had been on for 15 years, no longer pine for suicide, and am healthier than ever. Some people gain positivity and meaning from being Christian, and that’s fine, but it’s not for everybody. I wish I left sooner, as I’m finally mentally stable and could not be happier that I radically changed my perspective from the suffocating belief that there’s only one way to live.

0 0 Reply • Share ›

Beatrice ↗ nsloveco
5 days ago

Religion has nothing to do with living a spiritual life. The spiritual life is completely independent of any man-made institution and yet completely interdependent with one source- in my case, G-d. Be the person that G-d created, not the one that any group or culture expects you to be. Connect with the life around you and know that it's all perfectly designed by the same universal Creator who designed you :D

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FreeToRoam
4 days ago

The journey I took to get myself and my family well and what I've learned the last 3yrs .. when you've too much metal in your body.. it gives you the fight or flight and when parasite get into your brain barrier.. it changes our thinking .. the anxiety and depression. I personally know 2 people (a 5yo and a 30yo..two separate family) their parents have seen the changes in their personality and behavior (parents said it came out of no where) my chiropractor also a nutritionist did a NRT (Nutrition Response Testing) and found parasites in their brain .. the Dr said she been finding a lot of patients with parasites in the brains other than the guts. The Dr. detox them both and parents got their child back..

1 0 Reply • Share ›

jann
a day ago

In addition to a push to medicate children, self-diagnostic online mental health screenings are being put into place in schools. It's probably being paid for with COVID relief money as a solution to pandemic-caused mental health problems. Parents need to be aware that these are actually very dangerous. One of them, "Kooth," is being installed in PA schools and ignorant lawmakers are encouraging it. We need to inform them of the reality.
https://www.koothplc.com/

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